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ABSTRACT

The question addressed is: Can education maintain high quality if it has to either accept or create equality? Americans throughout their history have defined justice to mean that the more open the society is, the more just it is; the more inclusive, the more acceptable. If the notion of quality is tied to an automatic exclusion of any percentage of the population, it is simply not acceptable in terms of American democracy. If, on the other hand, quality indicates a goal to be aimed at, a standard to be set, and an achievement to be defended, then it clearly is compatible with a great measure of equality. What we have to deal with in our institutions is not only the quality of scores or knowledge but also the quality of life and citizenship. (Author/MSE)

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Can Quality Coexist with Equality in a Just Community?

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It is a standard canard among students in Jesuit colleges that no Jesuit can answer a question without asking one. I am going to prove myself true to my tribe in trying to question, and if possible, redefine this morning's topic. The overall title is "Education in a Just Community". Our precise question is: "can education maintain high quality if, presumably under the general umbrella of 'just community', it has either to accept or create equality?"

There are, of course, several layers in all this. One of the questions we are asking is: can a highly developed world leader like the United States afford to tamper with the quality of its educational system, in the interests of an abstraction (and perhaps an unworkable one) like justice? Another possible question asks whether or not it wouldn't be wiser in the long run and more just to maintain high quality education and make it available only to those who can demonstrate sufficient ability to complete our programs. The understanding is that most applicants would not have the strength to do that. Another briefer way of putting our question would be to ask bluntly, "will justice spoil our schools?"

My remarks this morning will deal with two historical lines. The first is the development of the idea of justice in western society, and the second is a look at American higher education in the brief two hundred years it has had to establish itself. While I will strive mightily for objectivity, I am not above injecting all sorts of personal notes, but will promise to identify them when they occur. Let me start with a marvelous Talmudic tale.

Once upon a time, there was a great religious teacher in a village

in Eastern Europe. When plague threatened the country, this teacher took his people out into the forest, lit the prescribed ceremonial fire, and recited the appropriate prayers. Because he knew these three things, God raised his hand and the plague passed away from the village. A century later, there was another teacher in the village, and again the plague threatened. The second teacher lead his people into the forest, lit the fires, but completely forgot the words of the prayer. Nonetheless, because he knew two of the three needed things, God stretched out his hand and the plague passed away from the village. A hundred years later, plague threatened again. The village's teacher took his people into the woods, but he could not light the fire and he did not know that there once had been a prayer. Still, because he knew the little that he knew, God stretched out his hand and the plague passed away from the village. But in another century the plague again threatened. This time the teacher and his people were lost. They did not know the prayer, they did not remember how to light the ceremonial fires, and they had no idea where or into which forest they should go. My "olde lewed booke" does not tell me whether or not the plague wiped out the village.

When we talk about a just community, we are dealing with a word which has had a considerable history in western society. It might be of help to us to look at some of that development.

One view is that justice consists of whatever the stronger party wants, as Thrasymachos tells us in the Republic. Thucydides makes this notion clearer when he tells us of real-politik adopted by the Athenians. They held that justice was only a consideration when the two parties to the dispute were on the same level of power. When power became disproportionate, justice simply

did not apply. As the Athenians said to the Melians, "the powerful exact what they can and the weak yield what they must".

A softening, and an improvement of that notion, is justice as fair play, an idea which has dominated not only English political thinking and sport, but our own for several hundred years. All men are given roughly the same equipment, start at approximately the same line, are bound by the same rules, have no title to any special privilege, and win or lose strictly by skill and ability. That all experience of life contradicts this superb and beautiful image impedes its draw upon human nature in no way at all. We seek it in every game we play, and above all, in the vast and enormously organized games we watch. We pretend that it exists in our politics, and our national dreams are haunted by the Western, where moral options are as simple as the apple on the tree, and where the right and the good inevitably triumph.

It will come as no surprise to those who know European literature that the biblical view of justice is considerably tougher and more realistic. It challenges both the Greek and the "fair-play" vision. In Hebrew thought, justice includes a concern for those people in society who can be described as marginal: for the widow, the poor, the sick and the alien. The great words from Exodus are proof of that:

> You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him...
> You shall not afflict any widow or orphan...
> If you are harsh with them, they will surely cry out to me,
> And be sure I will hear their cry.

While Exodus teaches us the rights of the individual in society, we have only to look at the great prayers for Passover to hear the magnificent echo, "I am not free while any other man is not free".

The New Testament is the direct and lineal heir of the Old in this. One of the great triumphs of christendom has been to take the Hebrew insight and strive to apply it towards "the silent, the voiceless, the victims of injustice". The single word, "inasmuch", speaks so many volumes to the western conscience, that it is these days infrequently used. If Christianity added anything to Hebrew ascetic thought in this matter, it was that it placed an even stronger accent on those who lie outside and apart from the main stream of society. One of the best professors I ever had was speaking for that consciousness when he remarked, in answer to a question some twenty-five years ago, "le chretien n'a jamais tort du cote des pauvres". No citizen of christendom is wrong when he sides with the poor.

Without forcing reality too much we can see American higher education in its development parallels these stages in the definition of justice. As the notion of the just community has evolved and changed, so has our notion of the obligation that higher education owes to that community.

Education began in the American colonies in the same framework and form as in England. The job of higher education was to prepare "a learned clergy" and the tiny academy at 17th century Harvard worked along the same lines (although considerably less well endowed) as the mother universities of Cambridge and Oxford.

Harvard resembled the northern English university more than the southern in the rigor and exclusiveness of its theology. A Roman may note that in those days Harvard was considerably more elitist theologically, than academically. As John Calvin knew, there was little if any established connection between intelligence and grace.

This pattern of a classical, preclerical and highly selective education lasted well into the middle of the 19th century. There are many myths associated with this selectivity, but for our purposes here it is probably better to pass them over, except to point out that the early elitism was the old-fashioned kind, based more upon blood than brains, and resembling closely the elitism of the higher athletics in American education which rests more upon brawn than either blood or brains.

In the middle of the 19th century came the explosion, called the Morrill Act. With it we passed from an education limited to "gentlemen", and entered the more open pattern which has marked American education ever since. The "mechanic and agricultural arts" took their place as legitimate objects of study, and the reach of higher education extended on a fair-play basis to all those who could qualify, and who held some, even distant promise, of being able to succeed.

This particular virtue waxed more and more virtuous, as seats increased slowly and applicants swiftly. Standards were raised, the barriers sprang up, and late teenagers were put through the series of hurdles, jumps

and frustrations that now mark the approaches to a good college. We were after all, saying with God-like prescience: every man is equal, you have had your chance to qualify; if you can come in, come right in; if you can't, stand back and let those who can enter. That Matt Dillon would be more at home with this kind of admissions policy than Plato, Moses or Christ, appears to bother us not one whit. Our hero is still the cop on the white horse.

Despite the increasing severity of admissions standards, the proportionately increased "cooling out" of thousands of freshmen and sophomores in the major public institutions in the nation, there was some hankering after the implications of the Morrill Act, some openness to all comers, and a corporate worry about the exclusion of possibly successful candidates. Neither public will nor public dollars gathered behind the hankerings.

What changed us was the quick succession of World War II, the national fright over Sputnik and the mammoth expansion of higher education through the early '60s. Colleges sprang up right, left and center; the community college movement was born and reached maturity almost in one stride; major systems, such as California and Ohio, announced that they really had "open admissions" on a striated basis; at least one major urban system, the City University of New York announced that it had "open admissions" without any effort to channel its students into either its four or its two-year institutions. Higher education had suddenly picked up a single agenda, which could be summarized as mass if not universal higher education for an integrated and literate citizenry. I have to acknowledge immediately that no legislature enacted that agenda, and as a matter of fact none is likely to. With one exception, the great thrusts in American higher education have seldom been

subject to legislative enactment. At the moment, indeed, the people and the legislature seem to be moving in opposite directions. The decade of the 60's has left us, among other things, a snarling legislative disenchantment with higher education under which we still cringe. On the other hand, every working American parent still dreams from the day his child is born of getting him into "college." The immigrants pouring across the Rio Grande, like the immigrants who once thronged Ellis Island, dream the same dreams about "college" and what it can do for their children. For this reason, the difference between mass and universal higher education is likely in this Republic to be slender. We face a clear, popular commitment to give every young citizen who wants it at least a crack at higher education, with some reasonable hope of success. That some will not want to try is probably good for all of us. But no where in the nation is there any set of voters who will settle for an a priori exclusion which keeps their own children out of college.

In this sense the notion of "just society" has really been defined by the people, insofar as it pertains to higher education. What America is saying to itself is that the more open, the more just; the more inclusive, the more acceptable. If then the notion of "quality" is tied to an automatic exclusion of any percentage of the population, any racial, religious or ethnic group in the population, it simply is not acceptable in terms of American democracy. If on the other hand "quality" indicates a goal to be aimed at, a standard to be set and an achievement to be defended, then it clearly is compatible with a very great measure of equality. I hasten to add here that I am not even thinking about nonsense such as equality of achievement, equality of perception, equality of talent, or even equality of result. What I am talking about is a relative

equality of access, and a serious effort on the part of the higher education community to make certain that access does not lead to automatic and immediate frustration. We have really to go around saying that, while there is "room at the inn", the level, style, and comfort of the accommodations depends upon skill and application. In this richest of nations, it ought to be possible to say that, while the tallest and most agile dine high on the hog, nobody goes away hungry.

There is one place where equality is seriously challenged, even ignored in America. I am talking of any great cities; of New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, with all the power, concentration of talent, anguish and cruelty which they contain. These cities are the acid test of our vaunted "equality" and they are the places which make that equality most difficult to reach. They hold within themselves in an intense and compacted form all the problems of this Republic, and as a matter of fact of the western world. They also contain these problems within a terrible mutual visibility which makes it impossible to shunt aside peoples, races, or creeds with any kind of ease. While urban citizens have a fantastic tolerance for being jostled, they cannot and will not be herded like sheep, and, above all, they will not be culled out and separated. There is, for instance, no way that the City University of New York can preserve open admissions for its community colleges and deny it in its senior colleges, as long as the windows of one look into the other. While it appears that the Albany echo chamber (Carey sounds more like Rockefeller than Rockefeller himself) is talking of this, any such move would be a tragedy and a disaster for the City of New York. Like the Republic itself, on any given piece of ground, it cannot tolerate that its house be divided, black and white, poor and rich, good and evil, stupid and intelligent equal and unequal -- and still hope to stand in peace.

There is, of course, a further national reason why we must focus on the cities, in that they really are the test of the Republic. If they work, America works. If they fail, America fails. And insofar as American higher education can contribute to the quality of life in the great cities, it could have enormous impact; far beyond anything dreamed of so far, in all its research technology.

We should also remember that the new students to whom equal access is offered will not come to us empty handed. Beyond the divinity of love and wonder, they bring with them a new understanding of our mutual citizenship To place along side the enormous contributions black artists and musicians have made to America, there has to be a different view of citizenship in this Republic if one is black, or if one shares with any degree of scholarly understanding the black experience of America. It should go equally without saying that if one comes from any part of the world defined as hispanic, there is a view not only of American history but indeed of European history, which has to be different. Hispanics remember that between the British and the Roman Empires, there occurred another one larger than the first and more lasting than the second. Missing it is like never having seen the sea -- it changes the soul.

During all of the above remarks I have been dealing with the notion of equality as mandated by a "just community". I have effectively been saying that what we have to deal with in our institutions is not only the quality of scores or the quality of marks or the quality of knowledge, but also the quality of life and the quality of citizenship. It is that ambiguity with which I have been wrestling since I began.

That, however, is not the only ambiguity on our landscape. At no time in western history has justice been a fixed notion. It has changed and evolved at every step of our history, and it is changing and evolving now. It is best seen as something which we do at every moment, "the just man is as the just man does". The common note is his fidelity to the demands of the relationships which exist in any community. When we do not hear these demands or the voices which cry them out, when we are deaf to the widow, the orphan and the stranger, then, indeed, we are unjust. When we hear them and find ourselves unwilling to translate them into action, then too, we are unjust. We are most unjust, most deeply untrue to ourselves, when we hide behind titles, shibboleths and myths, and claim not only that the cries do not reach us, but that there are no widow, orphans and strangers. Like all practical and competent peoples we are impatient with intractable material and with problems which take time, effort, and may, indeed, never be solvable. On the other hand, we are a direct and compassionate people, and for us now, as in the past, the greatest failure, the greatest crime, is not to try.

Higher education cannot create a just society. It can help. It can help if it is as preoccupied with spiritual as it is with intellectual quality; if it recognizes that there is no just society, and ultimately no human quality worth having where there is no serious striving for equality.